



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## SOME MEDIÆVAL CHARMS

In Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, at the conclusion of the tournament held to settle the rival claims of Palamon and Arcite to the hand of Emily, we are told that, though none were killed, many were sore hurt, and that one had his breast-bone pierced with a spear.

To othere woundes, and to broken armes,  
Some hadden salves, and some hadden charmes,  
Fermacies of herbes and eek save  
They dronken, for they wolde hir lymes have.

Thus, besides putting salve on their wounds and taking the old woman's remedy, sage tea, these doughty knights had recourse to charms to heal their wounds and save their limbs.

Though it is not always easy to determine just when Chaucer is speaking seriously and when with sly humor he is satirizing the corrupt practices and outworn customs of his day, it seems clear from his own picture of the doctor, the "verray parfit praktisour," that charms were a necessary part of the stock-in-trade of the fourteenth-century physician. Of this doctor, who was one of the famous Canterbury Pilgrims, Chaucer tells us, it is true, that "his studie was but litel on the Bible"; but skeptic as he was, the great weight of church authority which was back of these charms could not be ignored, and the doctor was, besides, too shrewd a practitioner to neglect any means for curing his patients. He even resorted to astrology and magic, and could control the heavenly bodies themselves if an unlucky star happened to be in the ascendant.

How widespread was the practice of employing charms for the cure of all sorts of ailments at this time may be seen from a casual examination of the many and various manuscript collections in the great libraries in London, Oxford, Paris, and Berlin, dating from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries. In some instances there are preserved whole books of charms, some of convenient size for the pocket, but in earlier days, when parchment was scarce and expensive, precious charms were carefully written on the margins of learned works, such as Bede's History, to serve

the reader in case of need. Originally they were written in Latin exclusively—the language of the Church—sometimes in Greek and Hebrew, but very early they were translated into and composed in the vernacular of various countries of Europe. Nearly always certain Latin words and expressions were retained in order to impress the mind of the ignorant sufferer through their mystifying, awe-inspiring sounds.

The process of applying the charm was very simple and natural. First, as an “epic precedent” a story is related of some heathen god or Christian saint who suffered from sickness or injury similar to that of the patient; then comes the prayer or invocation for aid in this particular case. Just as this god or that saint recovered, so may this man or this woman recover. Though there were, of course, many other formulas for spells and exorcisms through the use of potent names, this was the simplest and commonest form of mediæval charm.

As concrete illustrations of actual charms such as may have been used by wounded knights in Chaucer’s day, I have selected from manuscripts of the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries examples for the staunching of blood and for the falling sickness, or epilepsy. With a few exceptions these charms have been already published elsewhere. As might be supposed, the sufferings of Christ occupy the first place in the list of “epic precedents” cited to stop the flow of blood from those wounded with lance or spear, as appears in the following translation of a Latin MS. of the eleventh century in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris:—

*For Wounds*

Sing thus: Just as our Lord Jesus Christ was hanging on the cross, His side was pierced by a lance, and it neither suffered nor swelled nor made a sore, so thou too wound neither suffer nor swell nor make a sore. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. And place what medicine you will upon the wound. *Probatum.*<sup>1</sup>

Associated with Christ at the crucifixion, besides the two thieves, Dismas and Gismas (who were always appealed to in charms for the recovery of stolen property), was another charac-

---

<sup>1</sup> Translation of this charm and of following charms by the writer.

ter, Longinus, the soldier who thrust his spear into Christ's side and whose name by the thirteenth century is almost always included in the crucifixion charm for the staunching of blood:—

*Pour Saunc Estauncher* (Bodleian MS.)

Nostre seignour fu pris  
et en la croyx fu mis  
longis y vint alui  
et de la launce li feri  
saunc et ewe issi tret  
ses oilx leue et cleir veit  
par la vertu ki deus . l . fist  
conuir les veines et le saunc  
ki ne seine plus audunt.

*To Staunch Blood*

[Our Lord was taken and put on the cross. Longis came thither to Him and struck him with the lance. Blood and water issued forth. He [Longis] raised his eyes and saw clearly. By the power which God showed him, I conjure the veins and the blood that they flow no more.]

As the blood was believed to contain the vital essence (in the book of Genesis the blood of Abel actually cries out to the Lord from the ground), the appeal was made directly to the blood itself, and through the might of God it is ordered to cease its flow.

A somewhat fuller version in English, of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (likewise in the Bodleian), reads as follows—the language and the spelling here, as in all subsequent examples, being modernized:—

First have the name of the man or woman. Then go to church and say this charm and look thou say it but for man or woman devoutly: "When our Lord Jesus Christ was done on the cross, then Longuis came thither and stang Him with his spear in the side. Blood and water came out at the wound. He [Longuis] wiped his eyes and saw a man through the holy virtue that God showed there. I conjure thee blood, that thou come not out of this Christian man." And name the man his name twice: NN. or her name. "In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. Amen." Say this charm thrice, nor needest thou ever reck who the man or the woman be, so thou know his name or hers.

Later on, this charm was used also for the extraction of spears or of arrows from wounds, and as a further aid recourse was had to Nicodemus, who is believed to have drawn out the nails from

the feet and hands of our Saviour. By this time, too, Longinus has become a Jewish knight, as appears in the following translation of a German charm of the fifteenth century, preserved in the British Museum:—

*The Arrow Charm*

Longinus was a Jewish knight who stuck a spear through the pure side of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nicodemus the Jew pulled the nails out of the hands and feet of our dear Lord Jesus Christ. As true as these words are, so truly may this arrow go out.

The Longinus charm was employed not merely to cure wounds, but also to protect against all injuries from steel or iron or weapons of any sort, as may be seen from the following translation of a mediæval German *Waffensegen*:—

O Lord God, Protect me now  
Through the holy spear's blow  
Which Longinus through thy side thrust  
When thy holy heart within thee burst;  
And protect me too the blood  
That through thy very wounds then flowed,  
That all my enemies from me may flee  
And all weapons harmless to me be;  
Of all iron and of steel the cut  
Safe away from me be put,  
Just as our Lady her virginity kept  
When God Himself within her slept.<sup>2</sup>

From this element of invulnerability some scholars are led to infer a connection with the Balder myth. Though the direct relation does not appear to be well established, the basis is doubtless the same; namely, that the blood of one who is invulnerable could protect from injury all whom it touches, a widespread belief among primitive folk and strangely anticipative of the modern immunity theory.

According to Langland (*Piers Plowman*, passus 18, 88 ff.), Longinus (or Longeus, as he is there called) was blind from his youth, and when Christ was crucified, Longeus was the only one that dared joust with Him (an interesting parallel to Balder and the blind Höder). When he pierced Christ's side with his spear

---

<sup>2</sup> For the original see "Blut-und Wundsegen in ihrer Entwicklung dargestellt," von Oskar Ebermann. *Palaestra* (Berlin), XXIV, p. 52.

the blood ran down the shaft and miraculously unsealed his eyes; whereupon he fell on his knees and begged forgiveness of the Saviour, declaring that he had wounded Him against his will.<sup>3</sup> In the Coventry Plays Longinus is a favorite figure and excuses himself for his brutal conduct by saying that the Jews made him rave and that he was out of his wits. The name Longeus, or Longinus, seems to have been derived from the Greek word λόγχη, a spear, in John xix, 34, and the whole story was woven from a very slender thread. In the narrative of the crucifixion as given by John, the King James version reads: "But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came out blood and water. And he that saw it bare record and his record is true." The Vulgate has it: "Et qui vidit, testimonium perhibuit et verum est ejus testimonium." Through a mistake in the translation the pronoun *qui* was referred, not to John, but to the soldier, who *saw*, and hence must have been blind hitherto.

This story, which is given in full in the *Legendea Aurea*, owes its currency to the apocryphal book of Nicodemus, or The Acts of Pilate, dating from the middle of the fourth century, the Anglo-Saxon prose version of which belongs to the middle of the eleventh century. Thus it is one of the oldest of the Christian legends, and was widely circulated on the Continent and in England for many centuries. Even to this day the figure of the Roman Knight Longinus may be seen in the Black Forest on the highway, standing on one side of the crucified Christ with Christopher holding the infant Saviour in his arms, on the other. A portion of the very spear Longinus used is preserved to this day in St. Peter's in Rome, and is exhibited to the faithful with great pomp and ceremony on St. Longinus Day, March 15.

The Longinus legend is often attached to another independent story, both used as a sort of cumulative charm for staunching blood, and that is the Tres Boni Fratres, or the Three Good Brothers. An Oxford MS. of the fifteenth century contains the following example: —

---

<sup>3</sup> A similar miracle is told of St. Christopher. See Furnivall, *Lives of the Saints*, p. 219.

*This is the Orison that Our Lord Made for Wounds*

In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. Amen. When God went on earth He met three good brethren, and Christ said to them: "Ye three good brethren, whither go ye?" "We go to gather herbs for stroke, for blood, for swelling, for point [of weapon], for wounds, and for all achings." "Three good brethren, swear to me by the crucifix and by the milk of the Maiden that you conceal nothing and say nothing and that ye take no reward. And go to the Mount Olivet and take oil of olives and wool of a black sheep and lay to the wound and say thrice: 'Just as Longuis pitched the spear in the side of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that holy wound swelled not, nor boiled not, nor stank not, by that holy wound I conjure thee that ye swell not and that ye cause me no dread and that ye do no harm to this man or to this woman.' " In nomine patris, etc. Pater noster. This prayer shall be said the first day thrice; the second day thrice, and the third day once, and the sickness shall go out of the man. And he shall take no manner of meat or drink. And the wool with oil shall be laid on the wound when he is charmed.

The use of olive oil in this charm recalls the well-known fact that in the Middle Ages, and indeed until late in the sixteenth century, the universal treatment of wounds was by the application of hot oil.<sup>4</sup> In one version of this charm the direction is: "Lay this wool aforesaid with hot oil as he may suffer it that is wounded."

An interesting variant of this charm, still extant among the Irish, is given by Lady Wilde in her *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland*:—

*For a Pain in the Side*

"God save you, my three brothers, God save you! And how far have ye to go, my three brothers?" "To the Mount of Olivet, to bring back gold for a cup to hold the tears of Christ." "Go, then! Gather the gold, and may the tears of Christ fall on it, and thou wilt be cured, both body and soul."

---

<sup>4</sup> Ambrose Paré (1509-1590) discovered by accident that hot oil was valueless in the treatment of wounds. He was the first to use the ligature, and is called the "father of modern surgery."

Instead of the three good brothers, we often find three knights, or three apostles, or three evangelists, or three good women, especially three Marys:—

*Another for Bleeding* (Bodleian MS.)

Christ that died on the rood,  
And on the cross shed His blood,  
There came three angels that were good,  
With three chalices to receive His blood.

Christ Jesus, for thy bitter passion stay thou the blood of N.  
Say this thrice with a pater noster, ave, and creed.

*Bleeding to Staunch* (Bodleian MS.)

There went three Marys by the way. The first said, "Stay, blood, a God's name." The second said, "Staunch, blood, a God's name." The third said, "Stop, blood, a God's name, and bleed no more." Say this thrice with three pater nosters, three aves, and one creed. Fiat.

Here we have to do with an independent charm of the three women, based on Mark xvi, 1: "Mary Magdalene, and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and Salome brought spices that they might come and anoint him."

One of the most striking features of the foregoing Longinus charm and of the Three Good Brothers, as well as of many other charms, is the frequently recurring alliterative or rhyming formula, common in the early Latin charms and, of course, characteristic of the early Germanic versions:—

Nec putruit, nec doluit, nec guttam fecit.  
Nec dolorem, nec ardorem, nec calorem, nec tempestatem habuit.  
Si geswal noch geswar.  
That wond worked not, rotted not, festered not, rankled not.

All of which reminds us of the wound of Beowulf, that began to "swelan ond swellan." But perhaps the best example of such alliterating groups appears in the Anglo-Saxon charm for the water-elf disease:—

Swa benne ne burnon ne burston,  
ne fundian, ne feologan,  
ne hoppettan, ne wund waco sian,  
ne dolh diopian.



[So the wounds may neither burn nor burst,  
nor get worse, nor grow foul,  
nor throb, nor be soft wounds,  
nor deep gashes.]

Another brief charm based on Christ's crucifixion appears in a MS. dating from the beginning of the fifteenth century, and seems to have developed independently of the Longinus formula: —

Stand fast ; lie as Christ did  
When He was crucified upon the tree ;  
Blood, remain up in the veins  
As Christ did in all His pains.

That garrulous diarist, Samuel Pepys, tells us that at the close of the year 1664, in looking over all his papers and books with a view to "tear out that I found either boyish or not to be worth keeping, or fit to be seen, if it should please God to take me away suddenly," he discovered certain notes which he regarded as worthy of preservation: "Ages of my grandfather's children," "Their children's ages," and "Charms,"—one "For stenching blood," in Latin, identical with the English one given above; and another for "Thorne": —

Christ was of a Virgin born  
And he was prickèd with a thorn ;  
And it did neither bell nor swell ;  
And I trust in Jesus this never will.

These charms evidently formed part of a large collection, of which he showed a few specimens to that "good scholler and sober man," Mr. Brisband.

Still another extensive group of charms used to stop the flow of blood is based on the legend that when Christ was baptized in the River Jordan the water stood still during the whole ceremony. And as the water stood still then, so may the blood of this man or of this woman stand still and stop running. The earliest example of this charm is found in a Vatican Latin MS. of the ninth and tenth centuries: —

Christ and holy St. John were walking to the River Jordan. Said Christ to St. John: "Stop, River Jordan." Immediately the River Jordan stopped. So may the veins in

this man cease to flow. In nomine patris, etc.—(Ebermann, p. 24.)

Here is a fair charm in English (fifteenth century Cambridge MS.):—

Jesus Christ was in Bethlehem born,  
And baptized in the River Jordan,  
Stood the water on the stone,  
Stand the blood of this man,—

N., thy servant, through the virtue of the holy name, Jesus Christ, and of thy cousin, sweet St. John. And say this charm five times, with five pater nosters, in the worship of the five wounds.

Another (Bodleian MS.):—

God that was born in the borough of Bethlehem,  
And baptized in the water of flem [river] Jordan,  
The water was both wild and wood [mad],  
The child was both meek and good ;  
He blessed the flood and still it stood.  
With the same blessing that he blessed the flood,  
I do bless the blood by the virtue of the child so good.

And say five aves and one creed.

Thus during the baptismal ceremony, according to the legend, Christ either blessed the water or commanded it to stand still, and in some instances,—based doubtless on the incident of Moses striking the Red Sea with his rod in order to make a path for the Israelites,—Christ struck the water with a rod to make its flow to cease.

Later on, this Jordan charm was applied to the extinguishing of fire, to the stopping of hostile pursuers, and sometimes even to the conjuring of venomous serpents, as in a modern Bohemian version:—

Stand, cursed snake, just as the water in the Jordan stood when the holy John baptized our Lord Jesus Christ. Hence I conjure you by the living God that thou stand and give up thy poison. In the name of the Father, etc. Amen.—(Ebermann, p. 34.)

In the charms for the falling sickness, or epilepsy, we find that the epic precedent here deals with the story of the Three

Wise Men, or the Three Kings, who came from the East, led by the Star to the birthplace of our Saviour (Bodleian MS., seventeenth century): —

Gaspar with his myrrh began  
The presents to unfold,  
When Melchior brought in frankincense  
And Balthazar brought in gold.  
Now he that of these holy kings  
The names about shall bear,  
The falling evil by grace of Christ  
Shall never need to fear.

As a rule, the recital of this charm was accompanied by various prayers and religious exercises, besides certain mummary intended to impress the mind of the patient. A good example may be seen in the following, taken from a Cambridge MS. of the fifteenth century: —

*For the Falling Evil*

Take the blood of the little finger of the right hand that is sick, and write the three names in parchment with blood ✕ Jaspar ✕ Melchior ✕ Balthazar ✕ and let close it and hang it about his neck that is sick, and ere thou close it, put therein gold and myrrh and frankincense, of each a little, and bid him that hath the evil bless himself when he riseth from his bed every day with the three names, and say for their fathers' souls and their mothers' three pater nosters and one ave, and every day for one month drink the root of peony with stale ale, and he shall be whole surely. And if it be a child that is innocent, draw blood of the same finger aforesaid and write the three kings' names in a basin with blood and wash with ale and milk and let the child drink it and he shall be whole.

As a further strengthening of this charm, the parchment on which were written the names of the Three Kings was touched to the heads of the holy bodies preserved in Cologne Cathedral. The *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1749 reported that this charm was discovered in the linen purse of Jackson, the murderer and smuggler, who had been condemned to be hanged, and who, only a few hours after sentence had been pronounced, died in prison, and thus escaped the gallows. On the parchment was written in Latin: "The three holy Kings, Gaspar, Melchior, Balthazar, pray for me now and in the hour of death." Then in French is

added: "This charm has touched the three heads of the Holy Kings in Cologne. It is good for travelers and protects against all dangers of the way, pains in the head, falling sickness, fever, sorcery, every sort of evil, and sudden death."

The earliest document containing the traditional names of the three Kings,—Gaspar (Jaspar), Melchior, and Balthazar,—is a chronicle in barbarous Latin of the seventh or eighth century. Neither in the Gospel narrative nor in very early tradition were they spoken of as kings or as magicians, though they were later invested with magical or supernatural powers. The word "Magoi" in Matthew ii is to be interpreted as meaning Magians, members of a priestly caste among the Medes, whose religion, fundamentally that of Zoroaster, forbade sorcery. The Gospel narrative omits any mention as to the exact number and there is no certain tradition in the matter. Some church fathers speak of three. In the Orient, tradition favors twelve. A painting in the cemetery of Sts. Peter and Marcellinus shows two, another painting shows four, and still another eight. By the seventh century, among the Latins the number was fixed at three and the names with slight variations were as given above. The whole tradition seems to have developed out of Psalms lxxi, 10: "The Kings of Tharsis and the islands shall offer presents, the Kings of the Arabians and of Saba shall bring gifts and all the earth shall adore him." Thus Jaspar is made King of Taars, or Tarsis, and offers myrrh; Melchior, King of Nubia and Arabia, and offers gold; Balthazar, King of Godolia and Saba, and offers incense. But in the charms this order is by no means invariable. The Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, is sacred to the Three Kings, being the day on which Our Lord was first made manifest to the Wise Men of the East, and in Cologne, where the supposed remains of the Three Kings rest, their memory is celebrated with special pomp. According to the legend, on their return home they were baptized by Saint Thomas and wrought much for the spread of Christ's gospel. Melchior died first, on the first of January, being one hundred and sixteen years old; on the Feast of the Epiphany Jaspar died at the age of one hundred and twelve; and last of all Balthazar passed away, aged one hundred and nine. Saint Helena discovered their remains and brought

them to Constantinople, whence they were transferred to Milan, Italy, and finally to Cologne in 1163.

The connection of the Three Kings with the falling sickness is not quite so obvious as that of Longinus with the charm for staunching blood. And yet these Wise Men from the East, according to one account, slept for several centuries and then reappeared in Ireland to continue their good works. Doubtless their ability thus to recover from so long a trance gave them control over such temporary suspension of the faculties as takes place in epilepsy. Or more probably they are appealed to by virtue of their supposed powers as magicians. At all events we have here to do with a somewhat different type of charm from those cited to stop the flow of blood. Here the names have virtue in themselves if merely carried on the person. In ancient times the names of rulers or of gods were invested with mystery and sanctity and power, so much so that among the ancient Hebrews it was strictly forbidden to refer to the Deity by name.

Yet the principle in both types of charms is the same: To work upon the patient by means of suggestion. Thus it was but a slight step from the use of such well-known and awe-inspiring names to the use of any unknown and mysterious words or symbols. And so the *Hoc est corpus* of the priest at mass became the *hocus pocus* formula of the professional mountebank. Indeed, Professor Muensterberg in his *Psychology and Life* (p. 248) goes so far as to assert: "To murmur the Greek alphabet with the touching intonation and gesture of supplication is just as strengthening for the health as the sublimest prayer. . . . It is not the solemn value of the religious revelation nor the ethical and metaphysical bearing of the objects, which brings success, but solely the depth of the emotion." Though agreeing with the principle Professor Muensterberg lays down, most of us would be inclined to qualify his "just as strengthening" to "almost as strengthening, among ignorant people," and his "solely" to "chiefly."

From the examples given, the principle on which charms work, or at least a very large number of them, is clearly what the modern psychologists call auto-suggestion. The patient is induced to see a likeness or analogy between his own case and that of others in which the trouble has been abated, and through mental

suggestion is thus led to take part in his own cure. In some instances images are held up before the patient's eyes so as to aid his recovery by a similar process of sympathetic magic, as in the case of the brazen serpent in the wilderness (Numbers xxi, 8) and the golden emerods and golden mice (1 Samuel, vi, 5). The untrained mind, says Professor Mark Baldwin, "in its imperfect judgments by analogy raises the *post hoc* to the *propter hoc*." It is thus a very primitive and childish process, and from our point of view both foolish and irrational in its interpretation of the simplest facts of life. And yet to our forefathers of the Middle Ages this world of actuality which we can see and feel and smell and hear was but a small thing indeed compared with the unseen world peopled with good and evil spirits, the evil ones ever on the watch to shoot out their arrows against them, causing disease, and even lying in wait to enter their very bodies and take possession of them as well as of their souls. Thus vision and reality, fact and fiction, were strangely mingled in their minds and lives and profoundly affected their every thought and slightest action.

Is it any wonder, then, that these charms, with their curious compound of religion and legend, of heathen rite and Christian prayer, and their foolish jumble of words, should have played so important a part in the lives of the folk of mediæval times? A bread pill prescribed by one's family physician and taken with all good faith in his medical skill may and often does work wonders in cases of hysteria and hypochondria. And thus much of the modern faith-healing and psycho-therapy is based on the same process of auto-suggestion, which takes advantage of just such a confused mental condition. We no longer believe that by making a wax image of a man and melting it we can cause him to wither away and die, but we are all of us powerfully affected by this same process of analogy in thought and speech and action. Our greater scientific knowledge and our ability to relate effects to their proper causes prompt us, not to use such processes for unrighteous ends, as was doubtless too often the case in early days, but to control and direct them to a more complete restoration of mind and body.

JOHN M. MCBRYDE, JR.

Sewanee, Tennessee.